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Who's the Boss? An Examination of the Characteristics, Experience, and Training of Charter School Principals

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Introduction

Rooted in educational reforms stressing site-based management and school choice, the charter school movement comprises thousands of autonomous legal entities granted waivers or exemptions from state and local regulations in exchange for accountability for school and student performance. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools often have little contact with a local education agency and must handle administrative tasks typically completed at the district level, including financial management, recruitment and hiring of personnel, data collection and reporting, and various record-keeping and support functions. Responsibilities such as these are often given to charter school administrators, who must juggle them along with school-level charges like instructional leadership, curriculum development, student discipline, and coordination of students, staff, and parents.

Given the multiple, unique responsibilities involved in the administration and management of charter schools, it has become clear that these schools require experienced, highly qualified leaders. In fact, because of their autonomous character, charter schools may require even stronger leadership than traditional public schools. Though the substantial leadership needs of charter schools became readily apparent to researchers and charter school stakeholders as the movement gained traction in the mid-1990s, very little is still known about the experience and backgrounds of charter school leaders. This study seeks to address and help remedy that gap in the rapidly expanding charter school research base.

This paper begins by providing background on the charter school movement in the United States and discusses charter schools' need for strong leadership. Existing research on charter school leaders' experience is also considered, as well as research on the backgrounds, experience and training of administrators in the traditional public school sector. This paper then utilizes data from the U.S. Department of Education's 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to compare the demographic characteristics, professional education experience, and leadership training of charter school principals to their traditional public school counterparts. By using SASS data, which includes all public charter schools in operation during the 1998-99 school year that were also operating in 1999-2000, this paper seeks to provide an extensive analysis of the backgrounds, experience, and training of charter school leaders. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of this study's findings.

Charter Schools' Need for Strong Leadership

While the school choice movement has been a major focus of reform efforts in education over the last 40 years (Lane, 1998), charter schools did not appear on the education reform scene until 1991, when Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law. The law, "call[ing] for up to eight teacher-created and -operated, outcome-based charter schools across the state that would be free of most state laws and state and local education rules," (Sautter, 1993, p. 7) laid the groundwork for what has quickly become one of the most important, visible, and rapidly expanding education reforms in the United States today. "A charter school is a public school that, in accordance with an enabling state statute, has been granted a charter exempting it from selected state or local rules and regulations" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 4). Freed from these

rules and regulations, charter schools in many states can, for example, operate innovative and non-traditional programs or curricula and hire non-certified teachers and administrators. In exchange for autonomy from these regulations, charter schools are held accountable to produce satisfactory results. Charter schools are often grassroots efforts, usually organized and started by parents, teachers, or other community members (Nathan, 1996).

Like public schools, charter schools cannot charge tuition, are nonsectarian, are publicly funded, are subject to state and federal laws preventing discrimination, and must be in accordance with all health and safety laws (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Aside from these basic characteristics, however, charter schools differ in several key ways from their traditional public counterparts. For example, charter schools in many states report directly to state education agencies or non-district authorizers, and must undertake tasks like budgeting and hiring that are typically handled at the district level. Most charter schools are newly-created schools, and must overcome start-up obstacles like securing funding and a facility, attracting students and teachers, and building community support. Often, charter schools offer a curriculum and vision of learning that differs, sometimes significantly, from other public schools.

These and other unique features of charter schools require strong, highly skilled, and experienced educational leaders, perhaps even more so than traditional public schools. Charter school administrators must be, often at once, entrepreneurs, businessmen and women, instructional leaders, politicians, fundraisers, community activists, teachers, and managers. Although charter school leadership needs vary according to school type, operational status, and the experience of founders, leadership is

extremely important to the success and maintenance of charter schools, and many of these schools depend heavily on "strong, well-connected leaders" (Wells et al., 1998; Lane, 1998).

Wells et. al. (1998) examined this dependence as part of a UCLA-sponsored study of seventeen California charter schools in ten districts. In it, the authors state, "What struck us as 'strong' about these leaders was their ability to draw together diverse constituencies, such as parents, community members, and teachers, as well as to network outside the immediate school community… These leaders used networks not only to garner crucial political support from district officials or others in the education community, but… also to tap into private resources that aided in the success of their schools" (p. 40). Fourteen of the study's 17 schools featured "strong" leaders according to the authors.

In addition to requiring principals capable of generating political, community, and financial support, charter schools also need leaders skilled in developing a coherent school mission. Asked why they decided to start a charter school, 59 percent of founders stated that the realization of an alternative vision of education represented the most important reason in their decision (RPP International, 2000). The responsibility of realizing and developing a common school vision and mission rests primarily in the hands of the charter school administrator. Many charter schools with a clearly defined and ambitious mission have failed or had to undergo reorganization due to lack of expertise with the administrative capacities to run a school (Thomas, 1996). The Department of Education's National Study of Charter Schools, conducted by RPP International and the largest charter school study at the time, suggested that charter

schools with "strong management and leadership structures and that have a strong agreement about the school's vision among school staff and parents seem to have fewer internal difficulties" (RPP International, 1998, p. 101). Thus, because charter school organizers often have "powerful visions about curriculum and instruction" but fail to "appreciate the difficulties of putting together the legal and operational structure to support these visions," they require leaders capable of implementing these structures and processes while staying true to the original vision and mission of the charter school (Ley, 1998; Vergari, 1999; Millot & Lake, 1996).

Finally, recognizing that the development of "strong leaders and founders of charter schools is essential to the future success of charter schools and, more importantly, to the academic success of our students" (Ley, 1998, p. iv), Ley and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) conducted an extensive literature review of research on charter school leadership and analyzed the results of a 1996 charter symposium and a set of case studies in developing a profile of the primary leadership needs of charter school founders. To this end, Ley identified five core content areas, eventually used as part of a training curriculum for 48 charter school founders and administrators in 1998: start-up logistics, curriculum standards and development, governance and management, public and media relations, and regulatory policy issues. Within each content area, trainers discussed several more specific topics of knowledge and skills, including building a leadership vision and school mission statement, personnel hiring, financial planning, community relations, and state laws and regulations. The NWREL's core content areas and skill topics were developed in part as a result of a 3-page pre-evaluation questionnaire administered to 76 charter school founders in seven

states. The 40 respondents most frequently cited "leadership ability" as the area of top importance to the development of a charter school (Ley, 1998).

While the need for strong leadership is clearly recognized in the literature, research focusing on charter school leaders, sometimes called administrators, principals, deans, directors, or heads depending on the school setting, is quite sparse. Part of the reason for the paucity of literature in this regard is due to the youth of the charter school movement as a whole. Touted by proponents as autonomous entities offering innovative curricula in exchange for increased accountability, research on charter schools has, not surprisingly, tended to focus on autonomy, innovation, and accountability since the first charter school opened its doors in Minnesota. Other strands of charter school research during the past decade include examinations of student achievement, charter schools' relationships with local public school districts, student demographic characteristics, parental and community involvement, the role of charter schools in the school choice movement, and admission procedures and concern over "cream-skimming" and underrepresentation of disabled or other "at-risk" students in charter schools. While rarely a focal point, however, the characteristics, experience, and training of charter school leaders have been considered in some detail by previous researchers. The following section discusses findings in this regard.

Characteristics, Experience and Training of Charter School Administrators

Though few researchers have focused on charter school principals as their unit of analysis, they and other charter school stakeholders generally agree regarding the crucial importance of strong leadership in charter schools. Who, then, are these leaders, and what are their qualifications?

State education officials in Colorado were among the first in the country to shed light on these questions. Since 1996, the Colorado Department of Education has published annual evaluations of charter schools in the state. As part of the evaluations, data on charter school administrators' salaries and experience are collected. During the 2000-01 school year, 64 of 77 charter schools operating in Colorado reported that the mean salary of principals was $55,218, which was nearly $11,000 less than the average salary of all Colorado public school principals in 2000-01 (Colorado Department of Education, 2002). More important than salary with regard to the qualifications of charter school administrators is their prior experience as principals and as teachers. In 47 responding schools, administrators reported an average of 6 years of experience in the field of education. Excluding schools open for less than 2 years, Colorado charter school leaders reported an average administrative tenure in their current school of 2.5 years.

Supplementing these findings is research conducted by Dressler (2001), also involving charter school leaders in Colorado. In his study of 17 charter schools, most administrators (10) indicated that they had no formal training as an educational leader prior to assuming their post. Thirteen of the respondents, however, reported previous experience as a lead school administrator. Dressler's findings may not even be representative of charter schools in Colorado, however, as questionnaires were sent to just 53 of 80 charter schools operating at the time. Of the 53 schools included in the sample, administrators in 17 schools, all of which were located in urban areas, responded.

In an article appearing in the *Teachers College Record*, Griffin and Wohlstetter (2001) similarly examine 17 charter schools in urban areas. Charter school founders, administrators, and teachers from Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis and St. Paul

charter schools participated in focus groups in each of the three areas, responding to questions on student enrollment, instructional programs, accountability systems, and, most important relative to this paper, management and leadership processes. Administrators in charter schools with a greater amount of autonomy from school districts were, according to Griffin and Wohlstetter, more likely to engage in managerial, rather than instructional, leadership. Many such school leaders had only prior teaching, rather than administrative, experience in schools, making their jobs very difficult. "Across the three focus groups, a number of charter school teachers specifically noted that expertise in managerial and fiscal issues was a major deficit at their schools" (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 356).

Respondents in Griffin and Wohlstetter's focus groups also discussed tensions between centralized and decentralized management. Participants stated that decentralized, non-hierarchical governance systems were often favored at the beginning of their charter school's life cycle, though teachers were less able to continue to assist administrators in school decision-making as schools grew larger and more complex. Further, according to the study's authors, "the ability of charter school leaders to create an effective balance oftentimes appeared to be hampered by their lack of professional knowledge and experience in the management area. Few charter school leaders had a strong professional understanding of participative management or high-involvement organizations, further complicating attempts to establish a decentralized system that also was efficient" (p. 355).

Finally, Riley (2000) of the Pacific Research Institute (PRI) was able to collect extensive information on leaders' experience and training directly from charter school

administrators. Unlike the small sample sizes and limited case studies involved in research outlined above, PRI surveyed and received responses from all 100 principals of California charter schools open at least one year as of the 1997-1998 school year, in addition to a number of teachers and parents of students in those schools. The researchers found that, upon accepting the role of lead administrator in their current schools, half had served as a public school principal in their previous position. Forty-five percent entered their administrative role as a teacher in their previous position, while five percent worked as businessmen or women immediately prior to becoming principal. Most (87 percent) possessed either a California teacher or principal certificate at the time they responded. Unlike previous research, PRI's questionnaire asked principals to report on their educational background as well as their prior educational work experience. Sixty-six percent of respondents reported that they held at least a master's degree.

Characteristics, Experience and Training of Public School Administrators

Like charter schools, effective, skillful leadership is crucial to the operation of successful public schools. Beginning around the mid-20th century, scholarly inquiry into aspects of educational administration has prospered as researchers realized the unique leadership challenges that school principals faced as a result of the distinctive character of schools as workplaces (Willower & Forsyth, 1999; Greenfield, 1995). Since this time, research on school administration has generally focused on topics in areas such as human relations and leadership styles, organizational development, school restructuring and reform, preparation programs, and decision-making (Willower & Forsyth, 1999).

While not a major component of the research base, literature regarding school administrators' backgrounds, training, and experience includes some interesting findings.

For example, principal training programs, often required of prospective public school principals by states, were deemed by many in recent decades to provide poor preparation to future school leaders (Sarason, 1982; Gross & Herriott, 1978; Hodgkinson, 1992; Smith & Greene, 1990). As a result, many states have since made the improvement of these programs an educational priority. Rather than formal preparation programs, Miller (1987), based on responses from principals, advises that prior teaching and school leadership experience represent the best training mechanisms for educational administrators. Others have suggested that advanced academic degrees are important qualifications for school leaders (Smith & Greene, 1990).

Beyond training and preparation, many researchers have shown that personal demographic characteristics may impact the success and effectiveness of individuals occupying schools' corner offices. For instance, some scholars feel that women can be better principals than men because they are more likely to "readily exchange information, work more hours, are more inclined to be innovative, are more likely to be democratic leaders, and are more preferred by teachers and superiors than men" (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982, p. 52; Hemphill, Griffiths, and Frederikson, 1962). Also, much of the educational research of the last quarter century has emphasized the importance of cultural mismatches between homes and schools in explaining low rates of school success among students in many minority groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Erickson, 1987; Fine, 1981; Ogbu, 1987). As a result, educators and representatives of minority groups have responded with calls for better representation among teachers and administrators (U.S. Department of Education, 1996a; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Basic descriptive information regarding the demographic characteristics, backgrounds, experience, and training of public school leaders has been collected in recent years primarily by the U.S. Department of Education, state departments of education, other governmental agencies, and professional associations representing school administrators. Since 1987, the U.S. Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), described in more detail in the following section, has served as the most comprehensive data set for this type of information.

In *Public and Private School Principals in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1987-88 to 1993-94*, the U.S. Department of Education (1997) reported that, based on SASS data, male principals far outnumbered women in public schools by about 2 to 1 in 1993-94. This ratio was down from 1987-88, when 3 of 4 public school principals were men. Principals' average ages steadily climbed during this time, from 46.8 years in 1987-88 to 47.7 years in 1993-94, as did the percentage of minority school leaders, from 13.4 percent to 15.7 percent. The majority (64 percent) of public school principals in 1993-94 held a master's degree as their highest degree earned, and only 1.5 percent had a bachelor's degree or less. Public school leaders in 1993-94 reported having an average of 11 years of prior experience as a teacher and 8.6 years as a principal. About 54 percent held prior positions as an assistant principal, and 17.4 percent had served as a curriculum specialist or coordinator. Nearly 40 percent of public school principals took part in a program for aspiring principals in 1993-94.

Based on the above data from SASS and a self-administered survey, the Educational Research Service (ERS) (1998), in an exploratory report commissioned by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and National

Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), concluded that "there is a shortage of qualified candidates for principal vacancies in the U.S." (p. 9). District leaders cited insufficient compensation, job stress, and time requirements as the leading factors discouraging potential principals from applying or accepting a school leadership position. While nearly half of respondents reported experiencing difficulties in filling principal openings with qualified individuals, superintendents were extremely satisfied with the previous academic preparation of principal candidates. An overwhelming majority (92 percent) characterized the educational preparation of these candidates as adequate or excellent. Most district leaders responded that recruiting women for schools' top administrative positions was not particularly difficult, though increasing the number of minority principals was an issue in 35 percent of districts with administrative vacancies. Almost half of respondents reported that their district utilized a formal induction or mentoring program for new principals, while 27 percent of districts had an "aspiring principals program" to recruit and prepare candidates (Educational Research Service, 1998).

Though many factors influence the eventual success and effectiveness of educational leaders, prior professional education experience and training in school leadership help to prepare principals for the difficult jobs they face. Much is already known about the backgrounds, experience, and training of public school leaders. Much less is known, however, about the men and women who lead America's charter schools. As the charter school movement continues its rapid growth in both size and popularity, it is important now more than ever to comprehensively examine and document the

characteristics and preparation of charter school leaders in relation to their traditional public school counterparts. The remainder of this paper provides such an examination.

Methodology

Data Source

Data for this study are drawn from the 1999-2000 administration of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Administered by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), SASS is the largest and most comprehensive sample survey of schools, school districts, teachers, principals, and library media centers in the United States. Data are representative at the state and national level for public schools and the affiliation and national level for private schools. SASS uses a stratified probability sample design. The U.S. Census Bureau serves as the data collection agent for SASS.

This paper utilizes data from the public and public charter school principal and teacher components of the Schools and Staffing Survey. The 1999-2000 SASS includes responses from 891 principals and 2,847 teachers in all public charter schools open in the U.S. in 1999-2000 that were also operating during the 1998-1999 school year. In public, non-charter schools, responses from 12,260 principals and 52,404 teachers are included in this study's analysis. Weighted questionnaire response rates among these four respondents ranged from a high of 90.2 percent for charter school principals to a low of 78.6 percent for charter school teachers. Response rates for public, non-charter school principals and teachers were 90.0 percent and 83.2 percent, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Data Analysis

Using data from the four SASS questionnaires mentioned above, this study compares the backgrounds and experience of charter school principals and their traditional public school counterparts in three primary areas: background demographic characteristics, professional education experience, and leadership training. Background demographic characteristics include sex, race/ethnicity, and age, as well as principals' average salaries in 1999-2000. This analysis is intended simply to provide basic descriptive information regarding the demographic makeup of America's public and public charter school leaders. Measures of professional education experience include school leaders' years of experience as a principal or school director, years of prior teaching experience, and previous experience in various school positions, including assistant principal, department head, and curriculum specialist or coordinator. Questions regarding principals' highest academic degree earned, their participation in training or development programs for aspiring school leaders, and their involvement in various types of professional development activities, including university courses and professional association meetings, are included in this paper's analysis of principals' leadership training. In addition to these three areas, teachers' perceptions of principals' effectiveness and support are also examined

Because leadership needs vary among different types of schools, and because national estimates may mask trends occurring within discrete populations of schools, the data in this study are disaggregated by school level, school size, minority student enrollment, and the type of community in which the school is located. For comparative purposes, data from public school principals and teachers used in this study are limited to

states in which charter schools were operating during the time at which the Schools and Staffing Survey was administered. In examining potential differences between the backgrounds and experience levels of public and public charter school principals, tests of statistical significance were conducted at an alpha level of .05. All differences discussed in the following section were found be to statistically significant, and t-values are noted in parentheses.

Findings

Background Demographic Characteristics

Before examining the professional backgrounds and experience of charter and public, non-charter school principals, it is important to briefly consider some very basic characteristics of these school leaders. How much money do charter and public school leaders earn? What is the demographic profile of America's charter school principals, and does this profile differ from that of the men and women who administrate traditional public schools in the United States?

The answer to the latter part of this question is, "yes." Charter school leaders are much more likely than their public school counterparts to be women, and are, on average, more racially and ethnically diverse than public school principals. Charter school heads also took home salaries that were considerably lower than public school leaders in 1999-2000 (see Tables 1 and 2).

With regard to sex, females comprise a majority of charter school principals (54 percent). The distribution of women to men in public schools is equal but opposite, with 44.6 percent females and 55.5 percent males (t=7.3). This difference is even more pronounced in secondary schools and schools with relatively small student enrollments.

Women hold the top leadership post in over 48 percent of charter high schools, compared to just 23 percent of public, non-charter secondary schools (t=12.7). Similarly, 58 percent and 52 percent of principals in schools with an enrollment of less than 150 students and 150 to 349 students, respectively, are women, contrasted with 37 percent in similarly sized public schools (t=6.2, 5.7). The percentage of female principals was proportionately higher in charter schools than public, non-charter schools in all 14 school settings examined in this analysis with one exception: schools with a minority student enrollment of greater than 50 percent, in which the proportional difference was statistically non-significant.

While differences in sex were most striking when examining the demographic profile of charter school leaders against that of public school heads, some variation also existed among the average age and racial/ethnic distributions of principals. Across schools, charter school principals (48.3 years) are just slightly younger than their public school colleagues (49.5 years) on average (t=8.5). With regard to race, charter school leaders are, generally, somewhat more racially and ethnically diverse than public school principals. Seventy-one percent of charter school principals were white, non-Hispanic during the 1999-2000 school year, compared to 80 percent of public school principals (t=9.7). The greater percentage of African American leaders in charter schools (18.3 percent) than public schools (11.6 percent) accounts for most of this variation (t=9.5). About one-quarter of charter elementary school principals (22 percent) were black, non-Hispanic, compared to 12 percent of public elementary school heads (t=10.0). The percentage of principals that are Hispanic is approximately similar among charter and public schools. Finally, charter school principals were slightly more likely (3.3 percent)

than their public school counterparts (1.4 percent) to report a minority racial/ethnic background other than Black or Hispanic, including Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native (t=5.3), especially in schools with a minority student enrollment of less than 5 percent (4.1 percent vs. 0.2 percent) (t=27.6).

Charter school principals earned much less than public school principals during the 1999-2000 school year. On average administrators earned an annual salary of about $54,000 in charter schools and $69,000 in public schools (t=43.0), although the relatively small size of many charter schools may explain much of this variation. While public school leaders earned higher salaries across all school characteristics included in this analysis, the gap between principal earnings narrowed as school size increased. In schools enrolling between 350 and 499 students, charter school principals earned about $7,000 less than public school leaders (t=9.5), and the difference between these principals' salaries dropped to $2,500 in schools with more than 500 students (t=4.1).

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Insert Tables 1 & 2 here

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Professional Education Experience

With an understanding of some basic characteristics of charter and public school leaders, questions regarding their training and experience can now be examined. For instance, how many years of school leadership experience do principals in charter schools and public, non-charter schools have? How many years of prior teaching experience? What types of school positions did school leaders hold before becoming a principal?

On average, charter school administrators are less experienced as principals and as teachers than their public school counterparts (see Table 3). Charter school leaders

reported an average of 6.9 years of experience as a principal, compared to the 8.9 years of experience public school heads reported (t=8.9). This variation was greatest among administrators in high schools, schools located in rural areas or small towns, and schools where the percentage of minority students enrolled in the school ranged between five and 19 percent. In each of these school settings, public school leaders had a mean of three years or more of experience as principals than charter school leaders. In none of the school settings examined in this paper were charter school principals more experienced as lead administrators than public school heads.

Similarly, charter school principals (12.0 years) reported having slightly fewer years of prior teaching experience than principals in public, non-charter schools (13.9 years) (t=13.4). This finding was consistent across all school characteristics included in this analysis. The largest gaps (approximately 3 or more years of teaching experience, on average) existed among principals in schools with between 350 and 499 students, schools located in central cities, and schools with high minority student enrollments.

The National Center for Education Statistics, in its Schools and Staffing Survey, asked principals whether they held a variety of school positions prior to becoming principal. Charter school leaders (55.4 percent) were much less likely than public school principals (71.3 percent) to have previously held the position of assistant principal (t=13.2), especially in central city schools and schools with more than a 50 percent minority student enrollment (see Table 4). Thus, coupled with their fewer years of experience as principal, charter school leaders appear to have significantly less first-hand knowledge of school administration than public school leaders. In addition to assistant principal, public school administrators were more likely to have been athletic coaches or

directors (t=9.4), and sponsors for student clubs (t=3.3). However, a greater percentage of charter school leaders reported having held the position of curriculum coordinator (t=8.1) or head of an academic department (t=3.3) before accepting their current leadership post, especially in schools with large student enrollments. This type of experience may be quite helpful, particularly in charter schools offering unique or innovative curricula.

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Leadership Training

Based on the analyses of SASS data conducted to this point, it appears that charter school principals are, on average, less experienced as school administrators and as teachers than their traditional public school colleagues. This section takes one step further and addresses several questions regarding the type and extent of academic and professional development training these leaders have had that may impact their role as principals. For example, what percentage of charter and public school administrators hold advanced academic degrees? Have they taken part in a training or development program for aspiring principals? In what types of professional development activities have these principals participated during the previous year?

Charter school leaders are less likely than traditional public school principals to hold a graduate degree (see Table 5). Nearly 20 percent of charter school principals earned a bachelor's degree or less as their highest degree, compared to less than two percent of administrators in public schools (t=23.2). This discrepancy is largest in rural/small town schools and schools with a less than five percent minority enrollment,

where over one-quarter of charter school leaders lack graduate education credentials. Approximately 45 percent and 18 percent of principals in charter schools have earned a master's degree and professional diploma, respectively, compared to 57 percent and 31 percent of public, non-charter school administrators (t=9.9, 13.5). However, these trends do not carry over to the Ph.D. level, which partly explains why fewer charter school principals hold master's degrees or professional diplomas as their highest degree. A greater percentage of charter school leaders (18 percent) reported holding a Ph.D. or other doctoral degree compared to their public school colleagues (11 percent) (t=7.9). This is particularly true of principals in charter schools with more than 500 students, in which nearly one-quarter can be addressed as "Doctor."

Principals administering charter schools were somewhat less likely than public school leaders to have reported attending a training or development program for aspiring principals prior to taking on their leadership role (see Table 6). Approximately six percent more public school administrators participated in such a program in all states with charter schools open during the 1999-2000 school year (t=5.8), and this figure jumped to 13 percent more among principals in schools with less than 150 students and 15 percent more among central city school leaders. However, charter school principals were significantly more likely than public school leaders to participate in an administrative development program in schools with more than 500 students (t=3.5).

Comparisons between the likelihood that charter and public school principals participated in various professional development activities during the previous year yield mixed results. A greater percentage of charter school heads presented at workshops or training sessions (t=7.4), visited other schools (t=6.2), attended university courses related

to their role as principal (t=3.3), and engaged in individual or collaborative research (t=2.0). More public, non-charter school leaders, though, participated in workshops or conferences (t=10.2), attended professional association meetings (t=13.5), or engaged in a formal network of principals or directors (t=3.6).

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Insert Tables 5 & 6 here
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Teachers' Perceptions of School Leaders

Experience, preparation, and training contribute only partly to quality school administration. In addition, principals must develop a good working relationship with their schools' teachers to be considered effective leaders. With this in mind, the final part of this study goes beyond quantitative measures of principals' experience and training and focuses on teachers' perceptions of the support and communication skills of their school leaders. Do teachers believe that their school's principal is supportive and encouraging? Do principals share their educational vision with staff? Do they communicate with teachers about instructional practices?

Charter school teachers were slightly but significantly more likely to strongly agree with four of five statements regarding the effectiveness of their school's principal (see Table 7). Specifically, these teachers strongly agreed more often than public school teachers that their principals' behavior toward staff is supportive and encouraging (50 percent vs. 42 percent) (t=10.4), and that their principal enforces rules for student conduct and backs teachers up when needed (50 percent vs. 48 percent) (t=3.6), talks with teachers frequently about instructional practices (16 percent vs. 11 percent) (t=9.6), and knows what kind of school he or she wants and communicates this to staff (54 percent vs.

48 percent) (t=6.3). Approximately equal percentages of charter school teachers and teachers in traditional public schools strongly agreed that their principal lets staff members know what is expected of them.

Teachers in charter schools with 150 to 349 students, in rural areas or small towns, and in schools with a low minority enrollment rate were much more likely (by 14 to 17 percent) than their public school counterparts to strongly agree that their principals' behavior toward staff is supportive and encouraging (t=7.3, 5.6, 8.0). With regard to principals' ability to enforce rules for student conduct and stand behind teachers' decisions when necessary, teachers in large charter schools were much more likely (54 percent vs. 45 percent) than public school teachers to strongly agree with this statement (t=7.1). Similarly, in secondary schools and schools located in rural areas or small towns, about 10 percent more charter school teachers than public, non-charter school teachers strongly agreed that their principal has a vision of the type of school they want and shares this vision with staff.

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Discussion

The findings above include a number of interesting differences between charter school principals and their traditional public school counterparts. Most apparent, and alarming, are differences regarding principals' prior training and experience. On average, charter school leaders have significantly fewer years of prior experience as both principals and teachers than public school heads and are less likely to have earned a

graduate degree or participated in a principal training program. These differences can be attributed in part to some of the unique characteristics of charter schools and staff.

Burian-Fitzgerald, Luekens, and Strizek (2003) found that the percentage of teachers in charter schools with five or fewer years of teaching experience was more than double that of public school educators. Like teachers, charter school administrators also are less experienced than public school leaders. This finding may be partly due to the large number of charter schools that are newly created. In traditional public schools, leadership positions are commonly given to veteran teachers who have served the school for a number of years before becoming interested in its administration. Because about three-quarters of charter schools are newly created, and because the majority of these newly created schools began operating within the last five years, this type of career track is often not an option in charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result, in many instances charter school boards or operators must seek principal candidates from outside the school. Thus, while most charter school leaders have prior experience as teachers, principals, and assistant principals, they are less likely to have as much experience as the public school principals who are promoted from within the schools in which they were teaching.

Coupled with the much greater likelihood that charter school teachers also lack the experience of their public school colleagues, this finding may have troubling implications. Teachers, especially new teachers, often seek out principals for advice and support. If nothing else, the advice these principals are able to give charter school teachers is based on fewer years of teaching and administrative experience. In addition, less than half of charter school leaders participated in an administrative training program,

which may further hamper their ability to deal with these types of leadership responsibilities.

Charter school teachers, though, seem to be as satisfied or more satisfied with the support and communication they receive from their principals than public school teachers based on the findings in Table 7. Thus, charter school principals' relative lack of experience and training does not seem to have a negative impact on their ability to effectively communicate with and provide support to teachers, though this relationship is certainly worthy of further investigation. Charter school teachers' apparent satisfaction with their administrators may stem from the fact that charter schools are usually much smaller, and teachers in these schools have more frequent contact with the principal. This would explain why charter and public school teachers' levels of satisfaction were approximately equal in schools with student enrollments of less than 150 students. Further, because of the small size and community-centered character of charter schools, principals and teachers may be more likely to have selected each other as colleagues and share common educational goals and visions.

In addition to fewer years of experience, charter school heads have less academic preparation than public school leaders. Most striking is the high percentage of charter school principals holding a bachelor's degree or less. One of every five charter school leaders has not earned a graduate degree, compared to one of 60 public school principals. This substantial gap may be due to some extent to differences in the administrative certification and hiring requirements of charter schools. In many public school districts, candidates for principal openings must hold state administrative certification and at least a master's degree in educational administration or a related field.

Charter schools, however, are often granted autonomy from these and other similar hiring restrictions and are free to hire candidates that would be automatically eliminated from the public school principal selection process.

Aside from experience and training, the demographic profile of charter school principals differs significantly from that of public school leaders. While the typical public school administrator is a 50-year-old white male, charter school heads are, on average, more likely to be women and of a minority racial/ethnic background. Thus, it appears that different people altogether may be drawn to or selected for the charter school principalship. Unlike public schools, charter schools tend to be clustered in urban areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1996b). Central city schools enroll greater numbers of minority students, and minority principals may be more attracted to these urban schools. The much greater percentage of female charter school leaders relative to public schools is an interesting finding. Many charter schools employ unique teaching methods and curricula, and women may be more drawn to these innovative instructional aspects. Also, charter schools are typically much smaller than public schools, and their principals are often more directly involved with curriculum development and teaching and learning than their public school counterparts, which may be more appealing to female leaders.

It is important to note that the differences found in this study regarding experience and preparation do not imply that charter school leaders are less qualified than their public school colleagues. The quality of educational administrators involves much more than prior training, such as their styles of leadership and rapport with instructional staff. Indeed, as is illustrated in Table 7, charter school teachers were more likely than public

school teachers to strongly agree with various statements about their principals' effectiveness. However, the fact that charter school principals appear to be less experienced and educated than public school leaders deserves more focused attention in the future. Are experience, training, and preparation more important to public school principals than charter school leaders in carrying out their responsibilities? Does the autonomy that charter schools receive with regard to principal hiring regulations impact the type of leaders these schools hire? How does the relative lack of experience and training among charter school principals and teachers affect student learning and outcomes? This study's findings help lay the groundwork for research questions such as these.

Conclusion

Charter schools differ from traditional public schools in several ways. Differences include the autonomy charter schools receive from states and districts, the innovative and unique curricula employed at many of these schools, and the accountability mechanisms with which many charter schools must contend. Add to this list the characteristics and prior experience and training of their principals. Charter school leaders, more likely to earn lower salaries and to be female and racially and ethnically diverse than their public school counterparts, also have, on average, fewer years of experience as teachers and principals and are less likely to have previously earned a graduate degree, participated in a training program for aspiring principals, or held the position of assistant principal. Based on these measures alone, it appears that charter school principals are less qualified as school leaders than their colleagues in traditional public schools, mirroring a parallel trend regarding the relative qualifications

of charter school teachers (Burian-Fitzgerald, Luekens, and Strizek, 2003). The intention of this study was to provide a comprehensive, descriptive examination of the experience, preparation, training, and demographic makeup of charter school principals. As the charter school movement and its accompanying research base continue to rapidly expand, these findings and their potential effects on student learning and achievement certainly merit further investigation.

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